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Speak, Trauma: Toward a Revised Understanding of Literary Trauma Theory

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# Speak, Trauma: Toward a Revised Understanding of Literary Trauma Theory

“The ordinary response to atrocities is to banish them from consciousness.”

—Judith Herman, *Trauma and Recovery* (1)

“It is ironic that so much has been written about the biological mechanisms of traumatic psychological amnesia when the very existence of the phenomenon is in doubt.”

—Richard McNally, *Remembering Trauma* (182)

Do we forget the traumas we suffer, losing them in an amnesic haze, or do our moments of deepest pain remain available to us? This question drives Tim O’Brien’s 1994 novel, *In the Lake of the Woods*. In it, the Senate campaign of a Vietnam veteran named John Wade is derailed when word leaks that he was present at the My Lai massacre. Seeking escape after crushing political defeat, Wade and his wife Kathy retire to a remote lake house. Yet shortly after their arrival, Kathy vanishes, never to be found again. The novel’s drama is fueled by the fact that the nature of Wade’s involvement in each tragedy—the massacre in Vietnam and the disappearance of his wife—remains unclear. And this lack of clarity stems from the fact that he seems unable to accurately recall either event.

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Psychologists call the inability to remember an intensely painful experience traumatic amnesia, and the concept was central to specialists' understanding of trauma when *Lake* was published. (O'Brien directly quotes one of the great proponents of traumatic amnesia, Judith Herman, four times in the novel.) However, the suggestion that one may forget—or fail to accurately describe—trauma is also a foundational insight for the first wave of literary trauma theorists, among them Geoffrey Hartman, Shoshana Felman, and most importantly, Cathy Caruth.

It is a testament to Caruth's over-size importance to trauma studies that Ruth Leys, in her 2001 "genealogy" of the field, devotes an entire chapter to Caruth's work—as much as Freud. And though Caruth's two books on the subject—*Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (1995) and *Unclaimed Experience* (1996)—were published almost two decades ago, her influence endures. In 2011, Cambridge University hosted a colloquium on her work, and in an essay published that same year, Jean Wyatt writes that trauma theory is still "dominated by the theoretical framework" that she introduced (31).<sup>1</sup> For Caruth, trauma is an experience so intensely painful that the mind is unable to process it normally. In the immediate aftermath, the victim may totally forget the event. And if memories of the trauma return, they are often non-verbal, and the victim may be unable to describe them with words. Yet Caruth maintains that imaginative literature—or figural, rather than literal language—can "speak" trauma when normal, discursive language cannot, and fiction helps give a voice to traumatized individuals and populations. Hence, her theory of trauma is a ringing endorsement of the testimonial power of literature. Caruth builds that theory on the work of prominent contemporary psychologists and psychiatrists, most prominently Judith Herman and Bessel van der Kolk. In the mid-nineties, few clinicians were so influential in the field of trauma studies as this pair, and their work directly supports Caruth's claims that trauma is amnesic and unspeakable. Because she constructed her critical edifice on a scientific foundation, her theory has long been resistant to critique, and this resistance contributes to her system's enduring use value.

However, newer clinical studies of the psychology of trauma have challenged the theories on which Caruth relies. In 2003, Harvard's Richard McNally released *Remembering Trauma*, a review of new research that has been widely viewed as a shot over the bow of the trauma studies establishment—and that is now essential reading for specialists.<sup>2</sup> In it, McNally summarizes dozens of new studies—both his own and others'—that challenge some of the field's sacred truths. Though his research is exhaustive, his central arguments are quickly summarized: traumatic amnesia is a myth, and while victims may *choose* not to speak of their traumas, there is little evidence that they *cannot*. While its importance for the field of psychology is crucial, McNally's research also lays the groundwork for a critique of Caruth's literary trauma theory.<sup>3</sup> For McNally, unlike for Caruth, trauma is memorable and describable, and his book raises serious questions about the clinical foundation on which she builds her literary edifice while requiring contemporary critics to re-evaluate her model.

As the science of trauma changes, the literary theory of trauma must change too. And if McNally's work challenges the scientific figures most crucial to the first wave of literary trauma studies, critics in the field must address his theories. Thus, in what follows, I outline an alternative literary theory of trauma based not on van der Kolk

and Herman, but on McNally. In doing so, I undertake a number of basic tasks. First, I review the features of the older theory of trauma outlined by Caruth while identifying its reliance on models of traumatic memory McNally identifies as outdated. Next, I summarize McNally's research and point out the ways it forces us to rethink Caruth's work.<sup>4</sup> Third, I propose a new model of literary trauma theory built on McNally. And finally, I deploy that new model in readings of a variety of modern works that depict trauma.

### Caruth and Trauma Studies in the Nineties

Though her description of trauma shows her debt to Freud, Caruth ties her literary theory firmly to the work of contemporary clinical trauma specialists, most prominently van der Kolk and Herman. The two most important elements of her depictions of trauma—its amnesic quality and its unspeakability—find analogues in the work of these theorists.

For Caruth, the traumatic experience is “unclaimed”—to cite the title of her field-defining work. In trauma, the horrific moment arrives with such world-shattering force that it scrambles the brain's function, and the victim is unable to process the experience in a normal way. Trauma forces the self into hiding, and while the sensory manifold keeps “recording” sights, sounds, smells, and feelings, the brain fails to work them through. The videographer leaves, but the tape keeps running. The trauma, then, is “an event whose force is marked by its lack of registration” (Caruth, *Trauma* 6).<sup>5</sup> Caruth shares her assertion regarding the amnesic quality of the traumatic event with van der Kolk, whose works appear in the bibliographies of both *Unclaimed Experience* and *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*. In a volume van der Kolk edits with McFarlane and Weisaeth, the psychiatrist draws on the observations of Pierre Janet in explaining the brain's resistance to “registering” the traumatic event:

When people feel threatened, they experience a significant narrowing of consciousness, and remain focused on only the central perceptual details. As people are being traumatized, this narrowing of consciousness sometimes seems to evolve into a complete amnesia for the experience. More than 85 years ago, Janet (1909) claimed: “Forgetting the event which precipitated the emotion . . . has frequently been found to accompany intense emotional experiences in the form of continuous and retrograde amnesia.” (285)

He goes on to cite a variety of modern studies (some of them his own) that support Janet's initial claims and coincide with Caruth's portrayal of the vexed relationship between trauma and memory. Judith Herman—whose work *Trauma and Recovery* (1992) Caruth cites twice in *Unclaimed Experience*—shares van der Kolk's belief that the severest traumas are sometimes impossible to recall. In a 1987 study conducted with Emily Schatzow, Herman interviews a group of incest survivors, over a quarter of whom have almost no memory of their traumatic experiences. As McNally notes,

these patients “said they had been entirely unaware of their abuse until memories recently emerged in or outside of therapy,” and Herman takes these claims as verifiable instances of total traumatic amnesia (McNally, *Remembering* 200).<sup>6</sup>

The works of van der Kolk and Herman also support Caruth’s claim that trauma is sometimes nearly if not totally unspeakable. She develops this idea in her discussion of Freud in *Unclaimed Experience*. For Caruth, lacunae in the text of *Moses and Monotheism* silently bear witness to the traumatic nature of the author’s flight from Vienna before the Nazi invasion. Interpreting Freud’s oblique references to his hasty departure in that book, Caruth claims that he can communicate about his flight only “implicitly”; she continues, “Freud’s writing preserves history precisely within this gap in his text; and within the words of his leaving, words that do not simply refer, but [ . . . ] convey the impact of a history precisely as what *cannot be grasped* about leaving” (21; emphasis original).<sup>7</sup> Caruth thus argues that Freud can neither grasp nor precisely describe the details of his traumatic narrow escape. It seems as if van der Kolk would agree with her diagnosis. In the chapter cited above, he explains how traumatic memories differ from memories of normal events: “[W]hat may most complicate the capacity to communicate about traumatic experiences is that memories of trauma may have no verbal (explicit) component whatsoever. [ . . . They are organized] without any accompanying narrative about what happened” (van der Kolk, McFarlane, and Weisaeth 287). Because they have no “verbal component,” memories of trauma elude narrative representation; they are essentially indescribable.<sup>8</sup> Again, Herman agrees. Later in *Trauma and Recovery*, she describes the difficulties that victims face when confronting their traumas for the first time in therapy: “[A]s the [therapeutic] narrative closes in on the most unbearable moments, the patient finds it more and more difficult to use words. At times the patient may spontaneously switch to nonverbal methods of communication, such as drawing or painting (177). The takeaway remains the same: for Caruth and for both specialists, trauma victims may be unable to verbally explain their own traumas.

### Richard McNally’s “Skeptics’ Bible”

Richard McNally’s research team at Harvard University’s Department of Psychology engages a variety of subjects germane to the development of the psychological understanding of trauma, including anxiety, memory, and grief. McNally’s own work (developed in a wide-ranging collection of over 350 publications) often engages the links between trauma and memory, and *Remembering Trauma* (2003) has been called a “skeptics’ bible” for those interested in challenging the orthodoxies of trauma studies (Brewin 148). Among McNally’s targets are van der Kolk and Herman, and *Remembering* offers concise, convincing refutations of the most important pieces of their theories of traumatic memory. As his critique unfolds, we also realize that McNally’s work undermines the two most crucial tenets of Caruth’s literary theory of trauma: the notion that traumatic memories are “unregistered” or “unclaimed,” and the idea that traumatic memories elude straightforward verbal representation.

McNally opens his critique of van der Kolk bluntly, arguing that his “theory is plagued by conceptual and empirical problems” and supporting that attack with reference to no fewer than a dozen other clinical studies (*Remembering* 179). First, McNally undermines van der Kolk’s notion of traumatic amnesia—his suggestion that traumatic memories are unregistered. For McNally, such claims are not corroborated by empirical studies—not even by van der Kolk’s own. He writes, “[N]euroscience research does not support van der Kolk’s claim that high levels of stress hormones impair memory for traumatic experience” (180). And in an impressive five-page thrust-and-parry show, he undercuts roughly a dozen studies intended to establish the existence of traumatic amnesia (178–182).<sup>9</sup> Ultimately, McNally agrees that victims may not frequently think about the traumas they suffer. “However,” he continues, “one cannot conclude that a person who does not think about something for a long period of time—who has ‘forgotten’ it, in everyday parlance—is suffering from amnesia. Amnesia is an *inability* to recall information that has been encoded. We cannot assume that people have been *unable* to recall their abuse during the years when they did not think about it” (184; emphasis original). McNally also takes issue with Herman and Schatzow’s 1987 study of incest victims who claim to have forgotten the circumstances of their abuse. Most damning for McNally is the fact that the researchers fail to corroborate the victims’ claims that the incest occurred. Noting that the revelations of abuse came in group therapy sessions, McNally writes, “[S]ocial pressure to come up with abuse memories might have fostered formulation of illusory memories of events that never happened” (200). McNally does not deny the gruesome reality of incest; however, he doubts that an incest victim can suffer a total amnesia for the event. In essence, McNally alleges that proponents of traumatic amnesia conflate an unwillingness to think about trauma with an inability to do so. He further suggests that his opponents’ claims are essentially insupportable: “We can never ‘prove a negative’—prove that the information is not available in the person’s memory” (184). In brief, we may not extrapolate amnesia from a victim’s understandable desire not to dwell on a painful event. McNally even cites research suggesting that victims’ memory for trauma is actually *enhanced*. He concludes by wondering at the aggregate of research that purportedly engages an essentially unidentifiable phenomenon: “It is ironic that so much has been written about the biological mechanisms of traumatic psychological amnesia when the very existence of the phenomenon is in doubt. What we have here is a set of theories in search of a phenomenon” (182).

McNally also doubts the suggestion that that traumatic memory cannot be expressed in words. As mentioned above, van der Kolk claims that the traumatized person will maintain no narrative or “verbal” memory of the trauma. Victims may flash back to the trauma, or they may dream of it, but they will not speak it. McNally disagrees, again citing numerous studies by other specialists for support: “Contrary to van der Kolk’s theory, trauma does not block the formation of narrative memory. That memory for trauma can be expressed as physiologic reactivity to traumatic reminders does not preclude its being expressed in narrative as well. As Lawrence Langer (1991) has thoroughly documented, survivors of the Nazi Holocaust readily provide detailed narrative accounts of their horrific experiences” (*Remembering* 180). This critique runs along lines similar to those of the last: the traumatized person may



not *want* to speak of his or her trauma, but the researcher may not call this reluctance an inability to speak. McNally allows that the memory of trauma may be altered, but he rejects the notion that it is absent: “[P]eople who have experienced harrowingly close brushes with death (such as falling off a mountain) often report extreme dissociative alterations of consciousness (time slowing down, everything seeming unreal), yet they remain fully capable of providing detailed accounts of their experiences” (182).<sup>10</sup>

After reading McNally, one recognizes that Caruth’s theory of trauma is damaged by the material he gathers, as significant strains of contemporary psychological research suggest that trauma victims can both remember *and* describe their traumatic past in detail.

### An Alternate Model of Literary Trauma Theory

Hence, in what follows, I offer a new framework for the literary theory of trauma that calls for a number of shifts in the way critics engage depictions of the most devastating pains. I then attempt a number of textual readings that demonstrate the new framework’s use, its usefulness, and the ways it differs from previous versions of literary trauma theory.

This framework I propose is comprised of three dicta. *First, critics seeking to engage trauma in literature should turn their focus from gaps in the text to the text itself.* As the first generation of trauma theorists subscribe to an understanding of trauma as unspeakable, they gravitate toward textual lacunae in their readings.<sup>11</sup> They are put in the quixotic position of searching for textual evidence of things that cannot be spoken. However, McNally’s research suggests that traumatic memories are both memorable and speakable. Hence, a new generation of trauma theorists should emphasize both the accessibility of traumatic memory and the possibility that victims may construct reliable narrative accounts of it. Accordingly, these theorists should shift their attention away from gaps and toward actual text. This new approach will open up broad new expanses of material for interpretation. But it will also have two ancillary benefits. First, it will move us away from a theory of traumatic amnesia that is potentially harmful. The possibility of traumatic amnesia can be frightening for victims; if such forgetting is possible, an ominous memory lurks behind every bad mood, and the return of the repressed is a menacing possibility. An unremembered trauma is an event over which the victim has virtually no control, and admitting the possibility of total traumatic amnesia (or over-emphasizing its power or prevalence) steals agency from the survivor. Second, as Susan Brison notes, victims’ textual narratives of trauma—which are possible according to McNally—have healing power.<sup>12</sup> Speaking trauma pulls it from the realm of painful obscurity and hastens the process of rehabilitation. Brison, herself a victim of trauma, writes from her own experience of the beneficial power of simple descriptions of traumatic memory in *Aftermath* (2002), a book that precedes McNally’s and whose personal insights anticipate some of the clinical observations McNally later summarizes:

In contrast to the involuntary experiencing of traumatic memories, narrating memories to others [ . . . ] enables survivors to gain more control over the traces left by trauma. Narrative memory is not passively endured; rather, it is an act on the part of the narrator, a speech act that defuses traumatic memory, giving shape and a temporal order to the events recalled, establishing more control over their recalling, and helping the survivor to remake a self. (71)<sup>13</sup>

She goes on to suggest that the language a victim uses to describe such memories—far from being impossible—can be performative, in J. L. Austin's use of the word. It has the power to enact healing, give order, and allow the reconstruction of the victim's shattered psyche. Readers who accept the restorative power of language are likely to see the literature of trauma not as a collection of faltering or failing speech acts but instead as efforts—no matter how halting—at rehabilitation. Suggesting that simple "narration" of trauma is both possible and salutary does not steal the power that Caruth grants to literature. Doing so simply adds to the number of language types that victims may use in trying to move on.

*Second, trauma theorists should seek out evidence of augmented narrative detail.* As mentioned above, McNally notes new research suggesting that trauma may actually *enhance* memory—rather than hindering or banishing it. After reviewing a number of studies supporting a theory of heightened traumatic memory (*Remembering* 48–61), he concludes, "[E]motional stress enhances memory for the central features of the stressful experience. Stress does not impair memory; it strengthens it" (62). Traumatic memories, then, are not elusive or absent; they are potentially more detailed and more powerful than normal ones.<sup>14</sup> This fact should leave literary critics open to the possibility that authors may record trauma with excessive detail and vibrant intensity. Indeed, we may need more words—not fewer—to accurately represent its effects in text. Thus, readers looking for representations of trauma may turn not to textual absence but to textual overflow, to event descriptions replete with detail. Further, as the readings below demonstrate, traumatic memory is often multisensory; victims may record not only visual cues, but aural, olfactory, tactile, and gustatory ones as well.

*Third, trauma theorists should focus on depictions of experiences that are temporally, physically, or ontologically distorted.* McNally observes that while victims may have heightened memory of trauma, these memories may be altered. These alterations do not seem to change the substance of the memory but instead its affect. Time may feel as if it's slowing down. Spaces may loom. The world may feel unreal, or the victim may slip outside his or her own body. Specialists suggest that such experiences exemplify "peritraumatic dissociation," or what McNally describes above as "dissociative alterations in consciousness (time slowing down, everything seeming unreal)" (*Remembering* 182). For example, in a recent study of peritraumatic dissociation, Kumpula et al. interview survivors of a 2008 school shooting at Northern Illinois University. Of those surveyed, many who experienced the shooting are likely to agree that the following statements are apt descriptions of it: "My sense of time changed—things seemed to be happening in slow motion," "What was happening seemed unreal to me,



like I was in a dream or watching a movie or play,' 'I felt as though I was a spectator watching what was happening to me,' 'There were moments when my sense of my own body seemed distorted or changed'" (620).<sup>15</sup> Simply, one's experience of trauma may feel distorted in a variety of ways. As I hope to demonstrate in what follows, literature—and perhaps modern literature most convincingly—is capable of capturing the effects of this condition. And critics seeking trauma in literature should attune themselves to evocations of confusion, shifts in place and time, out-of-body experiences, and a general sense of unreality. Trauma doesn't efface memory, but it may warp it, and textual depictions of such distortion may be helpful clues in identifying its effects in literature.

### Three Readings: War Memoirs, Duras, and Safran Foer

To demonstrate this alternate theory of literary trauma, I present three readings. In the first, I engage written accounts of real-life war trauma by Wilfred Owen, Tim O'Brien, and American veterans of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. In interpreting these pieces, I analyze the authors' recollections of battle trauma, noting both the remarkably detailed nature of their accounts and instances of experiential distortion that are evidence of peritraumatic dissociation. Next, I offer a critique of Caruth's interpretation of Resnais's pioneering piece of *nouvelle vague* cinema, *Hiroshima Mon Amour*, and suggest the film's depiction of personal and historical loss supports McNally's theory of trauma, not her own. Finally, I use one dense passage from Jonathan Safran Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* to summarize how the three elements of this new literary trauma theory play out in the close reading of a fictional text.

#### WAR MEMOIRS

It is easy to recognize the characteristics of trauma as McNally describes it in both historical and contemporary war memoirs; therefore, I begin the test of my three dicta by engaging the nonfiction accounts told by veterans of World War I, the Vietnam War, and the recent conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq. As many authors have previously pointed out, World War I gave rise to one of the first rough efforts to name what we now call post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Army doctors would call soldiers psychologically haunted by their military experiences "shell shocked."<sup>16</sup> But shell shock does not necessarily preclude the soldier's remembering traumatic events. As just one memorable example, take the closing stanzas of the World War I veteran Wilfred Owen's "Dulce et Decorum Est," in which the poet describes the excruciating death throes of a fellow soldier struck down by poison gas<sup>17</sup>:

Gas! Gas! Quick, boys!—An ecstasy of fumbling,  
Fitting the clumsy helmets just in time;  
But someone still was yelling out and stumbling,

And flound'ring like a man in fire or lime . . .  
 Dim, through the misty panes and thick green light,  
 As under a green sea, I saw him drowning.  
 In all my dreams, before my helpless sight,  
 He plunges at me, guttering, choking, drowning.  
 If in some smothering dreams you too could pace  
 Behind the wagon that we flung him in,  
 And watch the white eyes writhing in his face,  
 His hanging face, like a devil's sick of sin;  
 If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood  
 Come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs,  
 Obscene as cancer, bitter as the cud  
 Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues,  
 My friend, you would not tell with such high zest  
 To children ardent for some desperate glory,  
 The old Lie; Dulce et Decorum est  
 Pro patria mori. (55)

The conditional phrases in the ninth and thirteenth lines of the passage—"If you . . . could pace," "If you could hear"—presuppose that the speaker *has* walked, *has* heard, and *has* seen. Rather than being lost or locked in the recesses of a traumatized brain, the speaker's recollection of his comrade's slow passing is seared into his memory. Indeed, his sight is "helpless" at these visions' return in "all" his dreams. Seemingly, he cannot forget it if he tries. Further, his memory is preternaturally detailed. We are shown the whites of the dying man's eyes. We see his "hanging" face. And we hear not one bump of the wagon as it painfully jars its passenger closer to death; "every" one is available. Notice also the multi-sensory nature of the memory, which includes both visual and auditory cues. Finally, while the sick seascape Owen sees through his gas mask may take its otherworldly quality from the tint of the glass, the strangeness of the scene—with its "thick . . . light" filtered "under a green sea"—may instead be the result of peritraumatic dissociation. The vision bears its markers: the screen in front of the speaker's eyes enhances the sense that he is a spectator watching a ghastly show, and the unreality of the situation—for how can a man "drown" on land?—may be the distortion wrecked by trauma's mnemonic imprint.

Tim O'Brien's memories of war, recorded in *If I Die in a Combat Zone, Box Me Up and Take Me Home*, also bear out McNally's descriptions of trauma. In the memoir, O'Brien, who began basic training in the summer of 1968 and served a tour in the vicinity of My Lai in 1969, records his experience of Vietnam, detailing both the near-misses he survives and the tragedies that steal his fellow soldiers and friends. He addresses one of the former in an early account of his company's close escape from incoming artillery fire:

Another explosion, fifty yards away.

Then a succession of explosions, tearing apart huts; then yellow flashes, then white spears. Automatic rifle fire, short and incredibly close.

[...]

On the perimeter of the village, the company began returning fire, blindly, spraying the hedges with M-16 and M-70 and M-60 fire. No targets, nothing to aim at and kill. Aimlessly, just shooting to shoot. It had been going like this for weeks—snipers, quick little attacks, blind counterfire. Days, days. Those were the days. (7)

Civilians can only imagine the terror inspired by an invisible enemy raining down fire from origins unknown. But what is notable about O'Brien's description of it is not the gaps that mar it but the way time bends in his memory of it. Of the same shelling, he writes, "Men were scrambling. Slow motion, then fast motion, and the whole village seemed to shake" (7). O'Brien's writing records the temporal distortion we would expect from a memory marked by peritraumatic dissociation.

In a later passage, O'Brien narrates an even closer brush with death that culminates in an explosion that kills another soldier just a few feet away. Here, a grenade streaks out from the foliage and misses taking off O'Brien's head by inches; bouncing off his helmet, it lands next to a man named Clauson, whose death O'Brien records in language reminiscent of Owen's: "I lay there and watched him trot a few steps, screaming; then he lay on his back and screamed" (117). Momentarily, O'Brien is a detached observer, a visual witness to another's passing. "I lay there and watched," he writes, using the language of spectatorship. It's hard to imagine a more destabilizing near-fatal encounter, but the author is fully able to put his account down on paper: "I remember my glimpse of the thing, fizzling there beside me. I remember rolling to my left; remember waiting for the loudest noise of my life. It was just a pop, but I remember thinking that must be how it sounds to a dead man" (117). The four-fold repetition of the word "remember" in this passage drives the point home: O'Brien has lost nothing of the memory to traumatic amnesia. All is present. Nonetheless, the author is clearly shaken by the event: "I couldn't move. I kept hollering, begging for an end to it. . . . Bullets were coming from the bushes. Clauson was gone, I don't know where or how, and when I put my head up to look for him, I couldn't see anyone. Everything was noise, and it lasted on and on" (117). These last few words evoke the familiar stretching of trauma's time, but nothing is lost on the witness.

Though we have yet to find a new O'Brien to provide definitive chronicles of our recent forays into Afghanistan and Iraq, the accounts of traumatized veterans of these conflicts also conform to McNally's understanding of the phenomenon. A recent *New Yorker* article by David Finkel gathers their stories and describes traumatized soldiers' efforts to recover from the psychological shock. Though these efforts differ, one theme recurs: recounting stories of war trauma is wrenching and difficult. But its difficulty springs not from some psychological inability to recall or restate, but from the reactions the soldiers expect from their neighbors and loved ones. Asked about telling war stories to his wife, one man named Nic says, "I'm afraid to tell her stuff. . . . It makes me feel like a monster" (Finkel 40). And rightfully so, perhaps. Another veteran in Nic's therapy group recalls his attempt to explain his war experiences to his wife. When he finishes, she rebuffs him: "You knew what you were getting into when you signed on the dotted line, and I don't feel sorry for you"; he continues, sobbing,

"When she said that to me, I turned to the bottle, and I never shared another fucking word with her" (39). Nic and the unnamed other veteran aren't unable to deliver accounts of trauma; they simply fear the results if they do.

Those who run Nic's group—which is part of an in-patient rehab clinic for traumatized veterans—rely on the fact that the soldiers *can* recall their war experiences. They often use a strategy called "habituation" to help the men and women recover, and the idea behind it is simple: repeating the story of a traumatic encounter over and over again acclimates one to the pain its telling entails. One session leader likens the process to watching a scary movie over and over again. The first time we see *The Exorcist*, it terrifies; the tenth time we do, it doesn't (Finkel 38). Near the end of the article, Finkel gives us one of Nic's first steps toward habituation, a written account of a house raid that he gives his wife to read:

I kick the stained-glass door open, sending broken glass into the room and the door against the wall. As we move through the first room, glass cracking under our boots, we identify only women sleeping in there so we clear the kitchen and bathroom and move upstairs [ . . . ] a man is running down. I slam him against the wall, forcing my rifle into his neck. Just as he starts to scream I push harder, crushing his windpipe and muffling the high-pitched yelp. I yell to one of the soldiers downstairs "I got one." He replies "Send him down." I grab the terrified man's arm, pulling him off balance over my left foot sending him tumbling down the stairs. We keep moving up. There are three rooms upstairs. One was already empty, another had a man with his wife and child waiting at their bedroom door and there was another door closed. [ . . . ] I had my rifle drawn while my buddy kicked it open, and there sitting on the side of the bed was an older couple just waiting like they have been through this before. I sent the woman downstairs and just stared at the man as he stared back at me, waiting for me to do something. After a few seconds I lost my temper, grabbed him by the throat and walked him out toward the stairs. I don't know if he understood me when I told him you can either walk down or fly down but after about two seconds he started to move. (40)

Nic's account stops here, and earlier trauma theorists might seize on this moment—the most dramatic of the account—to argue that trauma is unspeakable. But Nic goes on, using spoken words and diagrams to tell the rest. Indeed, he does throw the old man down in a fit of rage, but the part of the tale that haunts Nic most is the revelation that awaits him at the bottom of the stairs. Striding back to the glass door he kicked in earlier, he sees a mother holding an injured infant who had been lying next to the door when he sent shards flying through the room with his heavy boot. He had missed crushing the baby by inches. The story's denouement drives home not only the tragedy of this invasion but the too-frequent futility of the wars we fight. Nic's platoon has entered the wrong house, and all the injured inside are innocent.

Without belaboring the point, we nonetheless may see many of the elements of traumatic memory in Nic's account. First, we notice the strikingly detailed nature of

his narrative. He recalls the glass cracking underneath his boots in the first room. He remembers which foot he extends to trip the first man he sends tumbling downstairs. He knows how many rooms there are on the upper level. Nic's brain has recorded these moments in high definition. And Finkel, interviewing him, reminds us of the multi-sensory nature of the memories: Nic "could see it clearly [ . . . ] and apparently he could hear it too" (40). And while it is not distorted in his telling—we see no obvious signs of peritraumatic dissociation—his memory does take on the nature of a nightmare in retrospect. A common military procedure in the moment, Nic's experience has a horrific cast later on. It has become, as Finkel calls it, "his scary movie" (40).

#### HIROSHIMA MON AMOUR

*Hiroshima Mon Amour*, written by Marguerite Duras and directed by Alain Resnais, also deals with the tragedy of war, albeit more glancingly. And Caruth deploys her theory of trauma in a chapter-long reading of the 1959 film in *Unclaimed Experience*. However, I contend that a closer look at *Hiroshima* suggests that its depiction of trauma conforms more closely to McNally's characterization of the experience than to Caruth's.

The film tells the story of a French woman and a Japanese man who have a brief affair in Hiroshima fourteen years after the bombing. At its center is the woman's extended retelling of the story of the death of her lover, a German soldier, in the small French town of Nevers near the end of World War II. The woman plans to meet the German on the banks of the Loire River. Arriving at the shore, she finds her lover shot but not dead. She collapses onto his body and lies on it for hours while he dies. Shortly thereafter, the occupied city of Nevers is liberated, and the woman is dragged before local officials and shamed for her illicit love; they cut off all her hair, and her parents later imprison her in a cellar. For Caruth, the woman's faltering efforts to tell the tale confirm the theory that victims may be unable to access and describe memories of trauma. Caruth makes much of the fact that the woman cannot identify the moment at which her dying paramour passes: "I was lying on top of him . . . yes . . . the moment of his death actually escaped me, because . . . because even at that very moment, and even afterward, yes, even afterward, I can say that I couldn't feel the slightest difference between this dead body and mine" (Duras and Resnais 651). That the moment of death "escapes" her—that she cannot remember it—proves its traumatic quality for Caruth; she explains, "[B]etween the 'when' of seeing his dying and the 'when' of his actual death there is an unbridgeable abyss, an inherent gap of knowing, within the very immediacy of sight, the moment of the other's death" (*Unclaimed* 39). For Caruth, the woman cannot "claim" the loss of the lover that escapes her; like all great traumas, it falls into the abyss of unknowability. Caruth finds further support for her argument in the questions the woman's new Japanese lover asks her; she writes, "[H]e does not ask about the lover's death as a fact she could know" (37). The Frenchwoman cannot know it because she cannot precisely recall it. And because she cannot recall it, she cannot speak it correctly.

But for Caruth, the German's death is not the only trauma *Hiroshima* tellingly fails to register. Indeed, she argues that the film itself instantiates the unspeakability of trauma in all but fictional terms. For *Hiroshima Mon Amour* is the result of Resnais's unfinished effort to produce a documentary about Hiroshima; though he travels to Japan to make a historical piece about the bomb and its aftermath, after a few months of filming, he scraps the idea in favor of the fictional love story. Writes Caruth, "In his refusal to make a documentary on Hiroshima, Resnais paradoxically implies that it is direct archival footage that cannot maintain the very specificity of the event" (27). More simply, documentary—the filmic equivalent of objective, representational "speech"—cannot capture the reality of a historical trauma like the atom bomb. Resnais's inability to document Hiroshima, then, is analogous to Freud's failure to verbally register the German invasion. Further, Caruth argues that the fictional *Hiroshima Mon Amour* testifies to the traumatic history of the city *more* effectively than the abandoned historical film could have: "it would appear, equally paradoxically, that it is through the fictional story, not *about* Hiroshima but taking place at its site, that Resnais and Duras believe such historical specificity is conveyed" (27; emphasis original). The implication behind Caruth's statement is powerful: if "speech" cannot capture the reality of trauma, fiction can. For Caruth, then, *Hiroshima* testifies to the three pillars of her trauma theory: that trauma is amnesic, that it is unspeakable, and that it is only effectively witnessed by fiction.

My sense, however, is that Caruth's reading of the film is too narrow, and her choice of scenes too conveniently selected to fit her characterization of trauma. Indeed, a more comprehensive interpretation of the film reveals that it actually depicts trauma and traumatic memory in much the way McNally describes it. First, Caruth's suggestion that the woman cannot "grasp" the death of her lover is undermined by the fact that the film characterizes her memories of the German's death and its aftermath as both extensive—the woman's story fills over eighteen minutes of the ninety-minute film—and extremely precise. As evidence of its precision, here is her extended description of the death itself:

We were supposed to meet at noon on the quays of the Loire. I was going to leave with him. When I arrived at noon on the quay of the Loire, he wasn't quite dead yet. Someone had fired on him from a garden [ . . . ] I stayed near his body all that day and then all the next night. The next morning they came to pick him up and they put him in a truck. It was that night Nevers was liberated. The bells of St. Etienne were ringing, ringing . . . Little by little he grew cold beneath me. Oh! how long it took him to die. When? I'm not quite sure. I was lying on top of him . . . yes . . . the moment of his death actually escaped me, because . . . because even at that very moment, and even afterward, yes, even afterward, I can say that I couldn't feel the slightest difference between this dead body and mine. All I could find between this body and mine were obvious similarities, do you understand? (64–65)

As Caruth points out, the exact moment of the lover's death does "escape" her. But notice how many precise details do not: the time of their meeting (noon), the origin



of the gunshot that kills him (“from a garden”), the duration of her stay (noon to the next morning), the type of vehicle that collects his body (a truck), the historical context (the liberation of Nevers), the sounds (bells), the church housing the bells (St. Etienne). Further, the woman’s inability to perceive the exact moment of death derives not from amnesia but rather from the failure of a thorough, conscious search: “All I could find between this body and mine were obvious similarities.” From even this small piece of the woman’s long tale, it is apparent that she can both accurately remember and effectively speak of the trauma that befalls her. And we do not need trauma theory to account for her inability to note the exact moment of her lover’s passing; we need only Shakespeare. When Cordelia dies in *King Lear*, Lear demands a mirror that he holds up to her mouth, hoping to determine whether she still breathes—and whether she still lives. Shakespeare knows it is difficult to pin down the instant of death; the French woman knows it too.

The woman’s recollections of her incarceration in the cellar are similarly detailed. These memories are perhaps more remarkable because they are multi-sensory. The film itself records many of the visual details of the basement—the iron bars on the window, the stone steps, the black cat who occasionally visits. But the woman’s other four senses “recall” her jailing too. She remembers the “deafening” sound of the “Marseillaise” played and sung by passing crowds (55). She can still feel the pain of her fingernails scratching on the stone walls: “Hands become useless in cellars. They scrape. They rub the skin off . . . against the walls” (55). The camera shoots her licking the blood off her own raw fingers, and she murmurs, “I loved blood since I had tasted yours” (55). She can even remember the smell; she notes that cellars in Nevers are “full of saltpeter,” which some describe as having an acrid odor. In short, as McNally would predict, the woman’s recollection of her own trauma is accurate, available, and perhaps ultra-detailed.

It is also temporally adjusted; simply, her experience of the trauma is slowed to a painful near-halt. One of the woman’s strongest memories of the death itself is its length: “Oh! how long it took him to die” (65). This sense of unnatural lengthening—“Oh! how long”—continues through her time in the cellar. When her new lover asks her how long she spends there, she replies using a word that repeats later, “Eternity” (59). He presses her, “And then, one day, my love, you come out of eternity,” to which she replies, “Yes, it takes a long time. They told me it had taken a very long time” (62). Simply put, her incarceration/convalescence is colored by peritraumatic dissociation; it both takes a long time and *feels* as if it takes a long time.

One might add that there is little evidence to support Caruth’s claim that Resnais’s decision to abandon his documentary on Hiroshima to make a fiction about the city “implies” that “direct archival footage that cannot maintain the very specificity of the event” (*Unclaimed* 27). A number of facts damage this thesis. First, as James Monaco notes, fully the first fifteen minutes of the extant film are made up primarily of documentary footage Resnais shoots in preparing for the “archival” film he never makes (qtd. in Anderst 360). And these are among the most memorable and affecting of the entire piece. Resnais embeds them in his fiction not because they fail as historical markers but because they succeed overwhelmingly in placing the story that follows in geographic and historical context. Further, a brief glance at Resnais’s

filmography reminds us that he uses direct archival footage to chronicle a historical trauma just four years earlier, in his short film *Night and Fog* (1955)—a critically acclaimed documentary on Auschwitz. Finally, Duras's script features a long, nearly direct quotation from John Hersey's famous magazine-length essay on Hiroshima from a 1946 issue of the *New Yorker*. (Duras's footnote calls it an "admirable report" [19].) In a brief piece reflecting on the essay's influence fifty years later, Roger Angell notes the pervasive effect of Hersey's spare account of six survivors: the magazine article is still widely read, a four-night national radio broadcast on ABC shortly after its publication was heard by millions, and the book version has sold nearly four million copies (66). That Duras and Resnais quote it in their work indicates their faith in the power of direct reportage—not their abandonment of it. Simply, there is little in the film or in the script to support Caruth's argument that Resnais and Duras make a fiction about Hiroshima because they cannot make a documentary. This trauma, like other great traumas, is speakable. We can just testify to it in many different ways: an "archival film," a magazine feature, a radio broadcast, or a movie romance. The film-makers simply do the last of these.

#### EXTREMELY LOUD AND INCREDIBLY CLOSE

In her 2005 monograph *Trauma Culture*, Ann Kaplan argues that 9/11 is the "supreme example of a trauma that was experienced globally" because of its worldwide presence in a vast array of media platforms (2). Indeed, 9/11 is perhaps *the* contemporary historical catastrophe, and its echoes bounce throughout recent literature. Yet when they do, they bear out McNally's characterization of trauma—and the literary theory we might build on his insights. Accordingly, I close with a reading of Jonathan Safran Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (2005). In doing so, I focus on one dense description of the crucial moments of that sunny September morning in New York; I do so to demonstrate how McNally's research can aid critics in engaging trauma on the micro level, even in the close reading of isolated pieces of text.

Foer's book tells of a young boy Oskar's halting efforts to cope with the death of his father in one of the towers. These efforts lead him on a wandering journey all over New York City, during which he befriends an elderly mute whom we later discover is his paternal grandfather, Thomas. Though Thomas cannot speak, he writes to communicate, and Foer devotes long stretches to transcribing the grandfather's written accounts of his own life and his own traumas—which include both 9/11 and World War II. Among these is the mute man's description of his experience on the streets of New York when the second plane strikes the World Trade Center:

It wasn't until the second plane hit, and someone who didn't mean to holler hollered, that I looked up, there were hundreds of people around the televisions now, where had they come from? I stood up and looked, I didn't understand what I was seeing on the screen, was it a commercial, a new movie? I wrote, "What's happened?" and showed it to a young businessman watching the television, he took a sip of his coffee and said, "No one knows yet,"

his coffee haunts me, his “yet” haunts me. I stood there, a person in a crowd, was I watching the images, or was something more complicated happening? I tried to count the floors above where the planes had hit, the fire had to burn up through the buildings, I knew that those people couldn’t be saved, and how many were on the planes, and how many were on the street, I thought and thought. On my walk home I stopped in front of an electronics store, the front window was a grid of televisions, all but one of them were showing the buildings, the same images over and over, as if the world itself were repeating, a crowd had gathered on the sidewalk, one television, off to the side, was showing a nature program, a lion was eating a flamingo, the crowd became noisy, someone who didn’t mean to holler hollered, pink feathers, I looked at one of the other televisions and there was only one building, one hundred ceilings had become one hundred floors, which had become nothing, I was the only one who could believe it, the sky was filled with paper, pink feathers. The cafes were full that afternoon, people were laughing, there were lines in front of the movie theaters, they were going to see comedies, the world is so big and small, in the same moment we were close and far. (272–73)

If traumatic memory were unspeakable, what better symbol for that unspeakability than a man who cannot talk at all? And yet notice the irony in Foer’s tale: this speechless man can write at length of his own traumatic experience. Even the mute, it seems, can communicate the nature of deep-set pain—and speak hurriedly, at length. The quoted passage comes as part of a fifteen-page paragraph with no breaks, rendered in increasingly cramped typescript—so cramped that by the last pages it bleeds together into a nearly complete black block of ink. These pages give the sense that Thomas’s traumatic memory is not effaced but instead full to the brim. Words pile up on words as he rushes to get his recollections on the page. Later, after describing the experience of hearing a recording of his own son’s last words spoken from the World Trade Center shortly before his death (they are recorded on an answering machine that Oskar saves), Thomas’s response isn’t silence but the opposite: “I want an infinitely blank book and the rest of time” (281). Simply, he needs eternity and endless white space to capture in writing the entirety of his response to the passing of his son. For Thomas, there is too much to say about trauma—not a lack.

We also note one last time that Thomas possesses a remarkably acute memory of the event, filled with unexpected details that serve as support for theories of enhanced traumatic memory. Thus when the plane hits, he remembers what is on the televisions in the electronics store he passes—a bank of screens, all except one showing the towers. He even remembers the odd television out, which shows a nature program with lions and flamingoes. He notes that the cafes are full, and he recalls that crowds are seeing movies—comedies, even. He can directly quote his conversation with a passing businessman (who holds, and sips, a coffee), and he remembers the menacing note behind the individual word “yet.” He even recalls facts he should not be able to recall: the number of people on the street and in the planes as well.

Further, his memory of the event is both detailed and, it seems, altered in exactly the ways McNally would predict; again, in Thomas’s account, we see evidence of peri-

traumatic dissociation. First, there is a strong sense of the “unreality” of the moment. Thomas says that the “sky was filled with [ . . . ] pink feathers” when presumably it is not; in the altered state of traumatic witness, he transposes the televised images of the flamingoes’ plumage to the air surrounding. Nonetheless, even the real things he sees—like the scraps of paper for which the feathers are both metaphor and metonym—feel like a “commercial” or a “movie,” fictions intended to sell or entertain. (Recall the statement from the peritraumatic dissociation test cited earlier: “What was happening seemed unreal to me, like I was in a dream or watching a movie or play.”) Even his vision of the images seems stunted, and he asks himself, is “something more complicated happening?” Further, textual cues suggest that this passage decompresses a tightly bound moment, the very fullness of which seems to slow time. The passage opens with an auditory mark: “someone who didn’t mean to holler hollered.” Sixteen lines later, the exact same phrase repeats, allowing for the possibility that the intervening text describes an onrush of memories and impressions that unroll in slow motion but that endure just through the brief instant of an unintended cry. Finally, the last line indicates that Thomas experiences some sort of spatial and temporal distortion in recalling his memory of the event: “in the same moment we were close and far.” To be both “close and far” is to exist in two places at once, or perhaps to feel out of one’s own body—another marker of peritraumatic dissociation.

Like the veterans and the Frenchwoman from Nevers, Thomas has a traumatic experience whose memory is extreme, altered, but eminently available. And a revised understanding of literary trauma theory can help critics see how this is so.

### Reading the Wound

Of course, we might be loath to abandon the older model of literary trauma studies championed by Caruth and others—among them Geoffrey Hartman, Dori Laub, and Shoshana Felman—because of the unique power it grants literature to communicate our hardest hurts. In an interview with Caruth, Hartman states that “In the non-pathological course of events, the ‘unclaimed experience’ as you call it, can only be reclaimed by literary knowledge” (qtd. in Caruth, “Interview” 641). And in another context, he pithily argues that literature allows us to “read the wound,” to attend to the reality of world-warping loss (Hartman 537). These claims are powerful vindications of art in a traumatic age: if *only* literature can access trauma, then perhaps *only* literature can deliver reality in its truest form. Given such statements, it is clear why critics have rushed to the field in droves over the past two decades. These statements also seem to affirm what many post-structuralist and postmodern critics believe about the nature of plain, discursive language—that it is ill-suited for objectively representing certain aspects of the world.

However, after McNally’s work, we must be willing to give up the claim that *only* literature can help us read the wound of trauma. Nonetheless, to do so is not to argue that imaginative writing has no role to play in engaging personal or collective pain. Indeed, creative language, like discursive language, can aid in the healing process, and

the works of Owen, O'Brien, Resnais and Duras, and Foer attest to the fact that art can depict recovery, reconciliation, and rehabilitation—and perhaps, as for surviving veterans, effect them. These works, then, remind us that while literature may not be the only way of speaking trauma, it remains a valuable tool in the struggle to reclaim our most painful experiences.

## Endnotes

I humbly thank Richard McNally for his valuable feedback in responding to early drafts of this essay.

1. The briefest review of recent literature proves Wyatt's point. As just a few examples of contemporary appropriations of Caruth's model, see Versluys; Franco; Forter; Davis; McDaniel; and Outka.
2. Response to the book was immediate and overwhelmingly positive. In the field-defining journal *Science*, Stephen J. Ceci applauds McNally for tackling the "thorniest" studies and states baldly that by the end of the book, "readers will sense that the claims of a link between traumatic stress and memory repression are as representative of mainstream science as an Etch A Sketch is to mainstream art" (465). In a review in *Cognitive Behavior Therapy*, G. R. Norton writes that McNally, "as a thinker, an empiricist and a scholar, is almost without peer" and argues that his book "should change we think of psychological trauma" (112). Writing in a special issue of *Scientific American*, Daniel Cho applauds McNally's exhaustive research and admits that "he ultimately debunks theories of repressed memory and the 'trauma industry' that has sprouted to cater to this purported condition" (99). And in the *New York Review of Books*, Frederick Crews claims that *Remembering Trauma* should be "instantly recognized as essential for its field—a work that must become standard reading if that field is to be purged of needless confusion and fortified against future errors of the same general kind" (37).
3. In *Trauma Culture*, E. Ann Kaplan cites McNally's early research in developing her own probing discussion of Caruth's work, but as she did not have access to *Remembering Trauma* as her book went to press, she is unable to engage his work in its entirety.
4. For other critiques of Caruth's theory, see Hungerford; Leys; Radstone; and Hron.
5. Caruth's theory does admit of flashbacks: borrowing from Freud, she suggests that for a time, memories of the trauma remain "latent," temporarily absent from the victim's mind. But latency is always only fleeting, and the trauma eventually returns with a vengeance. For Caruth, the post-latent traumatic memory is a demon that torments its victim and returns against his or her will: "the event is not assimilated or experienced fully at the time, but only belatedly, in a repeated possession of the one who experiences it. To be traumatized is precisely to be possessed by an image or event" (4–5). Hence, the victim cannot be said to "remember" the traumatic event so much as be haunted by it, and traumas most often return via back-water byways, breaking in through flashback or dream.
6. In *Trauma and Recovery*, Herman elaborates on the process by which traumas may be forgotten by citing the work of Abram Kardiner, who argues that "a constrictive process kept traumatic memories out of normal consciousness, allowing only a fragment of the memory to emerge as an intrusive system" (45). Herman has long argued that a process of dissociation may force a victim to mostly or entirely forget the moment of his or her trauma.
7. Ruth Leys criticizes Caruth for selectively editing passages from *Moses and Monotheism* to support her thesis (284–291). For Leys, Freud has little difficulty writing of the German invasion.
8. In van der Kolk's experience, trauma patients have trouble producing spoken descriptions of the traumatic events that so relentlessly return as night terrors or flashbacks. This theory is supported



by studies showing that patients trying to recall traumatic experiences suffer a decrease in brain activity in Broca's area—the part of the brain most involved in translating experience into language (Van der Kolk, McFarlane, and Weisaeth 287).

9. I do not wish to reproduce long swaths of McNally's erudite but technical language in this essay; nonetheless, I offer his analysis of Joseph LeDoux—whom van der Kolk uses to establish the existence of traumatic amnesia—as an example of his process: LeDoux “discovered two pathways for activating the amygdala, a subcortical structure integral to the experience and expression of conditioned fear. One pathway rapidly transmits sensory input about fear stimuli to the amygdala via a subcortical route, whereas the second pathway passes through the cortex, taking about twice as long to reach the amygdala. Subcortical activation of the amygdala makes it possible for a fight-or-flight reaction to begin even before information about the fear-evoking stimulus has reached conscious awareness via the cortical route. Bremner and his colleagues believe that LeDoux's animal conditioning model illustrates how sexual abuse survivors might retain implicit, emotional memories of trauma while being incapable of consciously recollecting what happened. [ . . . However], LeDoux's conditioning studies have doubtful relevance for traumatic amnesia. His rats undergo several trials in which a tone is followed by a ‘brief, mild footshock.’ Because these aversive events are few, brief, and mild, they do not provide a suitable animal model for years of traumatic abuse. Furthermore, that the amygdala can be activated preconsciously does not mean that fear memories are unconscious. Even when input arrives first at the amygdala via the subcortical route, it also arrives shortly thereafter via the slower cortical route, accompanied by awareness of the feared stimulus. Hence preconscious activation of a rat's amygdala has nothing whatsoever to do with dissociated memories of trauma” (*Remembering* 178–80). Many of McNally's analyses point out the difficulties of extrapolating theories of human trauma from studies of rat stress.
10. Dominick LaCapra also questions Caruth's claim that literature has special power to witness to trauma, adding, “It is not clear, however, precisely how it does so. [ . . . ] Why may discourse on the literary accomplish this extravagant feat while psychoanalytic (and historiographical?) theory does not?” (*Writing* 183).
11. As examples, see Hartman's reading of Wordsworth's *Prelude* in his interview with Cathy Caruth and Felman's interpretation of Camus's *The Fall* in *Testimony* (1992).
12. In a recent article in *Science*, McNally points out that new forms of cognitive-behavior therapy—parts of which include recounting stories of trauma until distress is diminished—“have the strongest evidential support” for treating post-traumatic stress disorder (“Are We Winning” 872).
13. Brison, herself a trauma victim, takes issue with Caruth's claim that trauma is unspeakable, claiming that it paradoxically portrays the victim as unable to testify to his or her own trauma: “[T]his theory of trauma makes it conceptually impossible for a survivor to bear reliable witness to the trauma. This is like saying that an eloquent art critic cannot possibly enhance our understanding of a painting because the symbol systems used in painting and in language are incommensurable” (71). If we insist that victims cannot accurately testify to their own pain, we both disempower them and deprive them of a crucial tool for healing. Further, theories that maintain the inaccessibility of trauma can be used by the unscrupulous as bludgeons.
14. McNally theorizes that a keen memory for trauma is a competitive advantage for all species; those individuals who can best recall threats, dangers, or catastrophes will be better equipped to deal with future stresses (*Remembering* 62).
15. Kumpula et al. also list depersonalization, disorientation, and a feeling of disconnectedness from one's body as other symptoms of peritraumatic dissociation (617).
16. Hipp explores “the poetry of shell shock” in a 2005 volume of the same title.
17. Owen, a World War I veteran, writes the poem in the hospital in 1917 following a tour. Gabrielle Myers, who considers Owen a PTSD victim, argues that “Dulce” exemplifies how “the poetic impulse can heal the damaged witness” (219).



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